Affect and ipsative approaches as a counter to Pedagogic Frailty: The guardian of traditional models of student success

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Abstract

In this paper I consider how the neoliberal discourses surrounding Higher Education have resulted in an increasingly risk averse culture of learning and teaching. Students are frequently reluctant to engage with troublesome or challenging knowledge and academics are less likely to push learners into contested spaces or deviate from excepted pedagogical practices for fear of upsetting them. The consequences of this situation are that we potentially have a generation of graduates who lack the resilience to cope in the graduate market. Drawing on the notion of pedagogic frailty consideration of how models of success that are associated with high stakes, single point assessment, might limit the development of positive affect in learners. I argue instead for a reconsideration of notions of success building on the principles of ipsative assessment as a means of supporting the development of affective attributes, such as resilience, optimism and hope, in an effort to ensure graduates are equipped for an uncertain future.

Keywords: Assessment, pedagogy, emotions, student learning, teaching

Introduction

Changes in the Higher Education landscape over the past two decades have resulted in an increasing identification of students as consumers and universities as service providers (Barnett, 2011; Klemenčič, 2011; Molesworth, Scullion & Nixon, 2009; Scullion, Molesworth, & Nixon, 2011; Williams, 2013; Woodall, Hiller, & Resnick, 2014). Higher Education, now part of a market economy (Barnett, 2011), has become over-shadowed by threats of litigation and value for money, resulting in the emergence of new and hitherto unforeseen challenges to both students and academics as they strive to achieve and foster success. (Ball, 2003; Barnett, 2011; Kaye, Bickel & Birtwistle, 2009; Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005; Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). The idea that Higher Education is seen as a place of challenge for learners where they are confronted by troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 2006; 2008) designed to stretch their thinking and facilitate their understanding is no longer universally acceptable. (Delucchi & Korgen 2002; Land, 2017; Williams, 2013; Instead we are confronted by students who 'expect' the success they are paying for (Delucchi & Korgen, 2002; Regan, 2012; Shepperd, 1997), and an academic body that is increasingly reluctant to push learners into uncomfortable and troublesome places for fear of 'upsetting' them (Kinchin, 2015). The resultant risk averse culture that is emerging seems to be at odds with the demands of employers who want creative, flexible, critical thinking graduates who are responsive to the demands of an ever-changing professional landscape (Barrie, 2006; Butterwick & Benjamin, 2006). In short, employers need graduates who have developed a set of graduate competencies or attributes that equip them with the intellectual skills and dispositions needed for a rapidly changing and uncertain future (Bowden, Hart, King, Trigwell & Watts, 2000). In addition, they want graduates who have developed the requisite psychological or affective attributes that ensure they can deal with the

associated uncertainty, complexity and challenge. It should be acknowledged here that such claims pose a direct challenge to the dominant neoliberal discourse pervading Higher Education, particularly in the UK and USA, which is predicated on the idea that Higher Education provides a sound preparation for the world of work (Naidoo & Williams, 2015). In challenging these assertions we need to consider how students and academics are positioned within the neoliberal university and the extent to which the increasingly restrictive learning environment actually limits rather than promotes readiness for work. This paper explores some of these tensions in relation to student success, focusing on how students and academics might be encouraged to stem the tendency towards risk-averse behaviours by developing affective attributes, such as resilience and hope that will support academic risk taking and confrontation with troublesome knowledge and liminal spaces.

In this paper I argue that in thinking about successful learning rather than success, students might be supported to develop complex learning skills and affective competencies that equip them for their uncertain futures beyond the academy. By moving away from the individualised, outcome focused notion of success as predicated by a neoliberal approach to education (Ingleby, 2013; Saunders, 2010), I argue for success to be considered in relation to academic practices and approaches to pedagogy which have the potential to limit or foster success. Drawing on notions of pedagogic frailty and ipsative assessment I explore the extent to which the constraining influences of the neoliberal discourse in Higher Education might be redressed. Of course, learning is influenced by more than academic practices and pedagogies i.e. issues of student finance and debt, mental health and career aspirations of learners will all influence how students engage with learning and impact upon notions of success. Of principal concern here is the move towards increasingly 'safe' pedagogies and how they might be

avoided. I am not suggesting that other factors are unimportant or irrelevant but rather offering a consideration of one view of success as a counter to the seemingly dominant, and arguably oppressive, neoliberal discourse within Higher Education (Clegg, Hudson & Steel, 2010; Morley & Dunstan, 2013).

Pedagogic Frailty: the guardian of traditional models of success

Kinchin and Winstone (2017) argue that this risk averse culture in Higher Education is symptomatic of what they term 'pedagogic frailty' (Kinchin, 2015; 2016a; 2016b), with learners and academics preferring 'safe' and uncontested spaces. Academics, they argue, no longer push students into troublesome encounters, opting instead to stick to tried and tested content and pedagogies which may require work on the part of the student but which keep them within largely familiar and comfortable learning spaces (Land, 2017). In so doing, success in the traditional sense may be more readily attainable but students are less likely to develop the intellectual and affective competencies needed for success beyond the academy (Darling-Hammond & Snyder, 2000). In talking about traditional models of success in this paper I am referring to models which emphasise the grades students obtain and take these as a single measure of competence (Astin & Antonio, 2012; Biggs, 2003; Elton & Johnston, 2002; Gibbs, 2006; Hussey & Smith, 2003). Affective attributes like resilience and hope are not likely to be fostered in students who encounter only limited challenges in their learning or who never stray outside of what is safe (Rattray, 2016) Students who do not experience learning situations which expose them to the complexities of their disciplines are less likely to be able to cope with complexity later. We must ask therefore if such practices are really fostering success in a meaningful way. As we shall see later in the paper such practices are not reflective of academics' inability to provide

challenging learning experiences. They are a consequence of the pressures exerted on academics by the neoliberal doctrine of accountability, consumerism and marketisation in an academy governed by league tables (Barnett, 2011; Findlow, 2006; Howard, 2013; Naidoo & Williams, 2015; Williams, 2013).

According to Kinchin (2017) pedagogic frailty offers an explanation for the predominance of traditional approaches to teaching, learning and assessment. Lectures, seminars, exams and essays continue to make up the dominant pedagogy for many students, despite these being at odds with the beliefs held by academics in relation to how people learn and what constitutes a positive learning experience (Howard, 2013). To this end it provides an explanation as to why success continues to be associated with graded performance on assessments, typically designed to measure the outcomes of learning through a set of predetermined criteria relating to knowledge that is quantified (Biggs, 2003 Jackson, 2000). The reluctance of academics to rethink success in terms of not just the end products but to focus on the learning process itself and the associated academic and psychological attributes as an indicator of success is a consequence of frailty (Winston, 2017). Kinchin (2017) argues that such 'pedagogic frailty results from the degraded quality and reduced extent of interactions within and between aspects of the professional environment' (p. 11).

In particular four key aspects of the professional academic environment (see below) are associated with the emergence of pedagogic frailty (Kinchin, 2015). In all cases it is the extent to which there is a convergence of beliefs or disharmony which seems to result in frailty. It is important to note that frailty is not a binary or unitary state, as a systemic condition it varies as the connections between individuals and departments within the system fluctuate.   It is dependent on the levels of harmony and variance along the four dimensions identified by Kinchin (2015) as contributing to

frailty. None of the dimensions alone evoke frailty but will interact with each other, the discipline and the institutional environment to create a sense of frailty or otherwise.

The first two dimensions associated with pedagogic frailty identified by Kinchin (2015) relate to the convergence of individual and/or disciplinary ideas about teaching and learning with that of the institution. The extent to which an individual's beliefs and values in relation to teaching and learning correspond to the approaches to teaching, learning and assessment they may be required to adopt within their institutional context is the first of these. Such values are discussed infrequently and as a consequence the potentially shared, or not, nature of them is rarely actualised (Mårtensson & Roxå, 2016). Kinchin (2017) acknowledges that the use of the term 'frailty' is not uncontentious evoking in us, as it does, a sense of weakness or vulnerability. His choice of term is however, no accident, using the term, as he does, to provoke in us an emotional response which renders us uncomfortable. He argues that developing the requisite resilience that is needed to take risks in our teaching is not easy and frequently takes us into uncomfortable places. Confronting our discomfort and engaging in discussions designed to support risk taking and resilience is an important part of combating the frailty (Mårtensson & Roxå, 2016). A bringing to the fore of such shared values could, according to Barnes (2014), create a greater sense of resilience within the academy.

It is not just individual values however that might be at odds with the dominant pedagogies of an institution. The extent to which disciplinary practices are mirrored by institutional pedagogy is also relevant here in determining frailty and is Kinchin's second dimension. Of particular relevance here is the idea of authenticity and the extent to which the learning opportunities being offered to students are perceived to provide authentic learning experiences by academics (Kinchin, 2015; Kreber, 2010; Pawlina &

Drake, 2016). If academics do not believe they are able to offer authentic learning experiences that will equip students for success in their chosen careers, in part, because of accepted institutional or even traditional disciplinary pedagogies which might be outdated and beyond their power to change, they will be less likely to try.

The third dimension of importance in the pedagogic frailty model is that of the research-teaching nexus (Kinchin, 2015). Whilst the model is not predicated on a particular view of this nexus it posits that the extent to which the individual academic's view of the research-teaching relationship is supported or at odds with institutional culture will serve to promote or discourage frailty (Kinchin, 2015). The final dimension of relevance to the model is that of locus of control (Kinchin, 2015). The increasing marketisation of Higher Education has resulted in a new form of managerialism in Higher Education which has seen decisions becoming increasingly centralised with less autonomy being given to the individual academic (Jones, 2014). This has resulted in decreasing levels of autonomy for academics promoting a reluctance to take risks as levels of accountability increase (Olsen, 2016). Creative pedagogies become risky and resilience is degraded as academics experience an increasingly top-down approach to the design, delivery and assessment of the courses they teach, in short increasing levels of managerialism (Findlow, 2008) constrain change and encourage a culture of 'playing it safe'.

Pedagogic frailty has largely been explored from the perspective of the academic providing explanations for risk-averse behaviour and declining resilience in relation to teaching and learning (Kinchin, 2017; Winstone, 2017). If teaching becomes increasingly 'safe', with academics less likely to try new approaches to delivery or to think about different models of assessment or ways to conceptualise success (Spooren. Brockx, & Mortelmans, 2013), learners will experience learning where they know the

'rules' and can follow them, where they themselves no longer take risks, where they perform a specified task focusing on the end result not thinking about the process of how the end result is attained or other ways to do this. In short, they become pedagogically frail as they stay within the limits, never learning to cope with set-backs in their learning or adapt to challenging situations. All they do is attainable and the rules are clear. To this end success is measured in test scores and final grades based on how much they know and how well they can solve recognisable problems. Such a view of success may ensure a good degree outcome but it is potentially limiting outside of the academy where the rules may be less clear and problems do not present themselves in predictable and familiar ways. To be successful in the graduate market future graduates may be confronted with problems that are as yet unknown. When faced with previously unseen problems success will be dependent not on the ability to follow a well-learned and rehearsed formula but rather on the ability to adapt and be resilient in the face of challenge.

It would seem to be time to reconsider normative views of success linked as they are to a set of fixed learning outcomes and judgements, and questions about whether these are achieved or not (Biggs, 2003: Regan, 2012; Sadler, 2005; Stobart, 2008). Typically normative views of success are associated with single, high stakes, assessment points that come at the end of a module or course and do not try to determine individual progression as students work through the curriculum content (Astin, 2012; Bloxham & Boyd, 2009). The consequences of normative models of success are that they frequently encourage students to search for model or 'accepted' answers to questions and to adopt 'safe' interpretations of ideas, rather than offering more individual or creative responses (Furedi, 2011). Such approaches may ensure good grades but they do not encourage students to take risks in their learning for fear of

obtaining a poor grade (Price & O'Donovan, 2006; Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan, 2010; Price, Carroll, O'Donovan & Rust, 2011). Success becomes linked to grades and performance and is associated with the outcomes of learning rather than the process of learning. It emphasises what is learned not how learning happens and can often be associated with prescriptive approaches to learning and pedagogy (Black & Wiliam 1998; 2003). Such approaches, I argue, do not support the development of complex academic and affective capabilities.

Ipsative Approaches and the development of affect

In the introduction to this paper I argued that it is important for learners to engage with troublesome knowledge (Perkins, 1999; 2008). If learners are to develop resilience they need to experience that which is challenging, ideas which will stretch them, concepts which are not immediately available to them. In short they need to learn not simply to understand the material presented to them but how to understand it and what to do when this does not happen immediately or easily. Only through challenging encounters can learners develop resilience, the ability to minimise the long-term emotional consequences of negative learning experiences (Rutter, 2006). Resilient learners are able to cope with setbacks to their learning and move on. They do not dismiss negative learning experiences as unimportant or inconsequential but rather, they are able to evaluate the situation and reflect on why it occurred. They do not internalise the negative experience as a personal measure of worth (Martin & Marsh, 2009; Nota, Soresi & Zimmerman, 2004). Such learners are able to accept the part they themselves may have played in the negative learning experience and identify ways to adjust future learning behaviours to minimise the potential repetition of the experience (Nota, Soresi & Zimmerman, 2004). Resilience is not only developed through encounters with troublesome knowledge it will also support future encounters with such knowledge

(Rattray, 2016). Resilient learners who have experienced difficulties mastering challenging materials in the past but who have overcome such difficulties will be more willing to engage with future encounters that involve troublesome knowledge.

An ability to deal with negative learning experiences is not the only affective competence that is important to the learning process. Work in the area of positive psychology suggests that other affective attributes also serve to facilitate learning (Lopez and Snyder, 2003; Seligman, 2006; Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich and Linkins, 2009). Research in this area highlights the importance of academic hope and optimism as important affective attributes that will facilitate and further learning. Academic hope serves as a mediator of problem solving abilities (Chang, 1998) and a predictor of future academic success that is more powerful than intelligence (Davidson, Feldman & Margalit, 2012; Day, Hanson, Maltby, Proctor & Wood, 2010). Academic hope refers to an individual's acceptance of their own agency in learning and their ability to identify and follow multiple pathways to the attainment of a distal goal (Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams III & Wiklund, 2002). Optimism relates to academic hope, emphasising as it does the importance of personal agency and self-determination as a means of achieving positive outcomes (Bryant & Cvengros, 2004; Shogren, Lopez, Wehmeyer, Little & Pressgrove, 2006). Taken together, resilience, optimism and academic hope, with their emphasis on personal agency, identification of multiple pathways to attain goals, a belief in positive future success and the ability to minimise the negative consequences of setbacks, offer an appealing skill set to future employers who want graduates prepared to deal with the unknown challenges they may encounter.

Resilience, optimism and academic hope are not static attributes, rather they are developed over time in response to learning experiences (Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens,

Pulvers, Adams III & Wiklund, 2002). As we accumulate learning experiences they build what Cousin (2006) has called 'emotional capital'. The importance of emotional capital for learning is that it serves as a source of support, motivation and even sustenance to enrich and sustain learning when difficulties and struggles are encountered. Learners who are high in emotional capital will persist in the phase of challenge and adversity and alter their approach in the face of an unsuccessful first attempt. They understand that mastery of a learning goal may not be achieved at the first attempt and can identify alternatives for a second or even third attempt. Learners who lack emotional capital, perhaps the learners' equivalent of pedagogic frailty, lack the ability to identify alternatives, are unable or unwilling to persist in the face of challenge and frequently give up before the learning task is achieved or concept mastered. Success in conventional terms for these learners is frequently out of reach and continued encounters with failure, or even perceived failure, in the shape of low grades simply serves to denigrate the emotional capital further.

Re-framing success

In this paper I argue for a reframing of success in ipsative terms as a means of supporting the development not only of students' academic skills but also their affective attributes and in so doing encouraging students, and indeed academics, to become less risk-averse. Ipsative approaches to assessment and learning offer an alternative conceptualisation of the learning process and how it is experienced by both learners and academics. Whilst research in the area is still relatively limited I contend that it has much to offer to our discussions of success and could serve as a counter to pedagogically frail practices. It offers academics a greater opportunity to reflect on the ongoing learning of students and to have a sense of where the student is in the learning

process. Such opportunities opening up, as they do, a more elaborate discourse between learner and academic (Hughes 2011; 2014) might encourage academics and learners to become less risk-averse as they experience the learning together and have a greater sense of what is to be learned and how it might be learned. As academics come to see that learners can cope with challenge they may introduce greater challenge into their teaching (Howard, 2013; Le Fevre, 2014), becoming less risk averse. Likewise learners who cope with minor setbacks become less risk-averse too. Thus ipsative approaches have the potential to counter the risk-averse climate as academics and learners engage in learning experiences that are bounded by trust (Cozilino, 2014).

Ipsative models of success offer a move away from normative or criterion referenced assessment at the end of a programme of study and focus instead on the ongoing learning experiences and accomplishments of the individual learner as they progress through the programme of study (Hughes, 2011; 2014; Hughes, Wood & Kitagawa, 2014; Hughes, 2017). The ipsative approaches to success utilise an approach to assessment that encourages students and academics to reconceptualise success as incremental and cumulative, something that is built gradually over time rather than something that is a single fixed measure of performance on a given day. Ipsative approaches encourage learners to reflect on their own progress and accomplishments, thinking about the process of learning as much as the product. In so doing learners are required to engage in ongoing self-reflection facilitated by discursive and dialogic feedback experiences that allow them to think about where they are in relation to their own understanding of what is being learned and where they need to go (Hughes, 2014). Success in such models may still include a final grade which is linked to the learning outcomes of a module but it is achieved through an iterative and recursive learning experience which has the potential to support risk taking as students see successful

learning as something that is ongoing and can be associated with some wrong turns and difficult encounters along the way. Students who have the opportunities to make mistakes and mis-steps are able to build resilience and emotional capital as they learn to cope with these 'failures' and move on.

Ipsative models of assessment and success create safe spaces for learners to explore learning. They are not safe in the sense that they offer no challenge but rather they are safe in that they provide the space to explore an idea and make mistakes. They remove the necessity that the first attempts to demonstrate mastery of the concept is the one that will be graded and serve as an indicator of success (Hughes, 2011; 2014; 2017). Many traditional approaches to assessment take this latter approach offering at most one opportunity for formative feedback on a small piece of work before the final summative assessment is graded (Bloxham & Boyd, 2009).   Such approaches are high stakes and learners frequently seek sample or model answers or accepted ways of approaching the assessment for fear of getting a low grade. Ipsative approaches offer the opportunity for multiple feedback experiences, and perhaps more importantly, support students in their abilities to self-assess and think about what is going on in their learning (Hughes, 2014). Rather than simply providing students with a grade and information about what might be wrong with the work they encourage students to engage with their own work and assess where they are in their own learning. In so doing students come to understand how to evaluate where they are in terms of their learning and where they need to go. In short, it helps students to establish learning goals and through their attainment potential paths to achieve future goals. In so doing the emotional capital (Cousin, 2006) of the learner is developed as they build confidence in their abilities to achieve goals through multiple pathways and their own agency. They come to see and understand who they

are as learners, which facilitates their ongoing planning and assessment of future learning.

Ipsative approaches facilitate engagement with troublesome knowledge as learners build the affective and academic competencies that will support their engagement with complexity and encourage them to accept liminality as an important part of the learning experience (Rattray, 2016; 2017).

In offering the case for ipsative approaches I acknowledge Hughes's (2011; 2014) assertion that it will be initially effortful and as such may be at odds with neoliberal managerial proclivities which emphasise pedagogical approaches that are uniform and fit easily within the audit and accountability culture (Barnett, 2011; Williams, 2013). It is possible however, to start making small inroads in to the approach utilising formative assessment opportunities as a first step (Hughes, 2011). We can start by asking students to add a reflective comment to any formative, and indeed summative, work they submit. This reflective comment should offer a qualitative remark on the students' experience of actually producing the work being reviewed; how did they prepare? what did they find difficult? what are they still unsure about? what do they feel they have done well?. Such a comment opens up a potential dialogue with the marker who, in the course of providing normal written feedback can offer a direct response to the reflective comments. To ensure the approach is truly ipsative before grades are released to students they may be asked to respond to the assessors' feedback once more, this time offering a reflective response to the feedback itself and what it tells them about where they are on their learning journey. If we build smaller more cumulative assessment opportunities in to our teaching then this process can gradually be developed so that it becomes an increasingly meaningful dialogue. In addition once students

become familiar with the process it can be extended to include peer review and feedback as an alternative source of comment and reflection.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued current climates in Higher Education have resulted in what Kinchin (2015) calls pedagogic frailty. Academics are becoming increasingly risk-averse against a backdrop of increased marketisation and accountability. Fears about how innovation and creativity in the learning they experience will cause students to complain or provide poor evaluations or detract from the real business of research has resulted in a continued dependence on traditional models of teaching and learning and notions of success. Such models may lack authenticity, be at odds with the individual values associated with teaching and learning espoused by an individual and not provide learners with the necessary graduate attributes for the future and yet they continue. I have argued that whilst pedagogic frailty may be an understandable or inevitable consequence of a Higher Education that is dominated by neoliberal ideas of consumerism, managerialism and accountability it may contribute to a generation of graduates who are not prepared for an uncertain and unpredictable future. Now is the time for academics to rethink traditional notions of teaching and learning and how success is conceptualised so they can reverse this trend and facilitate the development of academically competent and affectively prepared graduates who can face this future with some degree of confidence.

Drawing on the principles of ipsative assessment as a means to encourage learners not simply to think about the products of learning but about the process of learning and how they experience it offers an alternative way to think about success. Success becomes an amalgam of academic and affective attributes and as a consequence learners are less intimidated by encounters with troublesome knowledge, they have

learned to accept that such encounters offer challenges yes, but that they can be mastered with effort and resilience.

Ipsative approaches offer academics an opportunity to re-engage with pedagogy and innovative practices which whilst effortful potentially permit the reclaiming of academic practices that are less governed by fear and consumerism and offer a return to a focus on learning.   .

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